Understanding Event Sport Tourism Experiences of Support Partners

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Understanding event sport tourism experiences of support partners: A research note

Abstract

The purpose of this research reflection is to set the stage for a more detailed research agenda in exploring event sport tourism experiences of support partners (SPs) during events. Using photo elicitation the article presents a preliminary empirical case study. Visual materials were assembled by three female participants to interrogate how SPs experience 'spectator space' and explore the processes that produced those experiences, an area of study that remains relatively unexplored in leisure research. Initial findings show how waiting to see the triathlete can be anxiety-provoking but the release of emotion when smiles are exchanged constitute core activities of being there. However, there are more questions than answers and there is a need for further inquiry. Suggestions for future research on the impact of serious leisure on intimate others are given.

Key words: Event sport tourism, Triathlon, Support partner, Participants' entourage, Photo elicitation

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Introduction

This research reflection emerged from a preliminary empirical case study of the impact of event sport tourism on support partners (SPs) after my girlfriend wrote about her experience of supporting me through my first Ironman. Amy (2011) writes:

> "I thought I'd write my own experience of what it's like to be a supporter at an event like this because I don't think those who have never been on the other side of the barriers can appreciate the emotional toll it takes to watch someone you love put themselves through that".

Struck by the impact my serious leisure[1] interest had on her *during* the event raises some interesting questions about "…how we might understand the unspoken facets of the tourism experience" (Coghlan, 2012, p. 118-119). It also raises questions about the processes producing those affects and how 'spectator space' is experienced more broadly.

Making sense of this struck me as a fertile area of study, leading to the overarching research question: how do SPs experience spectating? The case study in this paper has one aim and one sub-aim. First, to explore how (triathlon) event sport tourism[2] is experienced by SPs. Secondly, to explain the processes that produce those experiences. The contribution is foundational and exploratory in nature. Its purpose is to set the stage for a more detailed research agenda in exploring SP experiences beyond triathlon.

Collective participatory roadside antics and the buzzing carnivalesque atmosphere generated by tour group cyclists at the Tour de France and the Tour Down Under have been objects of focus within recent studies on active sport tourism (e.g. Lamont, 2014; Shipway et al., 2016), yet limited research has explored tourism experiences of participants' entourage.

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[1] Ironman participants may be engaged in serious leisure (Lamont & Kennelly, 2012), which Stebbins (2011) defines as "…the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer core activity that people find so substantial, interesting, and fulfilling that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a (leisure) career centered on acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience" (p. 239).

[2] Travel to participate in sport is defined as sport tourism and persons traveling to participate have been described as active sport tourists (Weed, 2009). Serious leisure finds an outlet in sport tourism: the more involved a triathlete becomes, the more s/he is likely to travel to participate in events, potentially initiating an event travel career trajectory (Getz & McConnell, 2011).

Furthermore, little consideration has been given to experiences of SPs who are not actively involved in the same activity at the same time (Hultsman, 2012). While the nature of triathlon, its revolution and constituent sports has been well-documented in other research (e.g. Atkinson, 2008; Lamont & Kennelly, 2012), this paper initiates a response to McCarville (2007) and Lamont et al's (2012) calls for more research on the impact of serious leisure on SPs by exploring their experiences at the site(s) of visitation to the course where spectating takes place.

Support partner experiences of spectator space

This section presents some theoretical context to better understand the 'why' of sports tourism (i.e. why the experience was enjoyable and why repeat it) (Gibson, 2004) to understand what happens behind the barriers. By bringing in concepts of mobility, ways of looking, and embodied performance, this section opens up event sport tourism, getting *inside* SP experiences in terms of the 'activities', 'people' and 'places' that constitute endurance sport spectating as a "social, economic and cultural phenomenon" (Weed, 2009, p. 618). My point of departure is to consider how what could happen during an event is represented in the extant sport, leisure, event and tourism literature.

Since sport tourists tend to remain stationary for periods of time then move to gain privileged vantage points, stillness, waiting, short highlights and mobility are well documented in the leisure literature involving spectators (e.g. McCarville, 2017). This draws our attention to the tourist gaze in event sport tourism.

We know that tourists, for example, sometimes sit in awkward positions waiting to push the button on their smartphone to "eternalise the best moment" (Gyimóthy, 2009, p. 185), then later retrieve those images with family and friends (Stylianou-Lambert, 2012). Lamont (2014, p. 9) also observes how spectating can "get a bit rowdy after two days drinking" at *Le Tour*.

In Ironman, however, when significant others 'spot' *their* triathlete, this can lead to fleeting yet emotionally charged smiles. Writing about it years later, McCarville (2007) notes how he still gets emotional when he thinks of seeing his family in such moments. This invites the question, what would the "*looking at looking*" component (Mitchell, 2011, p. 137) of photographs taken by the entourage reveal about experiences of spectator space?

"Given the central role of the body and senses in tourism experiences" (Matteucci. 2013, p.196), to understand SP experiences, we must understand that a tourist's experience "…is grounded first of all in the body of the tourist" (Rakić & Chambers, 2012, p.1617). Bringing the body in draws attention to performative aspects and sensory experiences of SPs. Therefore, an approach is needed which does not give primacy to sight over the body, allowing us to observe enactments which constitute mobile and embodied performances of spectator space. This would help cast fresh light on the multisensory, corporeal and active movements in spectating.

Methods

Informed by an interpretive-constructivist epistemological approach (Lamont, 2014), data were collected through photo elicitation, which for Harper (2002) involves something as simple as inserting photographs into an interview.

A convenience approach was employed to contact the partners of Mersey Tri Club members I was training with at the time of this study (Table 1). It just so happens that I trained with men, Alvin and Bryan, and so the case study focuses only on women. This is consistent with leisure research which shows that women tend to more often be the carers and supporters when it comes to family travel and leisure [for discussions on gender participation/representation in sport tourism, see Gibson (2004, p. 255); Hambrick et al (2013, p. 174) and Simmons et al (2016, p. 233)].

[Table 1]

Criteria for involvement emerging from this approach were: all three women had watched their partner compete within the last year and experiences were easy to recall.

Participants were asked to assemble a handful of pre-existing photographs that they had in their home collections which they thought might be relevant (Harper, 2002). Criteria for inclusion of photos in the study were: they had been either taken by themselves or by somebody they were with to ensure participants had direct experience with the phenomena.

Data was collected between September 2011-March 2012. Bryan and Alvin regularly invited me to eat with their family at home after training. So when I asked Connie for an interview and she suggested sharing her photographs after dinner, this arrangement felt natural. On a separate occasion this happened also with Lynn.

An interview template combining ideas borrowed from Getz (2008) and Holloway et al (2010) was developed so I have gone into analysing the data with this revised framework in mind. This generated a semi-structured yet open-ended schedule and helped keep conversations on topic. Questions such as 'what advice would you give somebody watching their loved one compete in an Ironman for the first-time?' and 'what constitutes a successful day of spectating?' were asked.

This process produced 15 photographic images, used primarily to generate interview data. Interviews with Connie and Lynn, lasting approximately 60 minutes, were digitally recorded then transcribed verbatim, producing over 33 pages. Together with Amy's original Word document (>5,000 words), the transcripts were analysed. Additional data was collected through informal follow-up conversations during face-to-face interactions with all three women to allow them to clarify information.

Traditional thematic analysis was used to identify recurrent themes in the data (Rapley, 2011). Transcripts were read, re-read and annotated several times, allowing the experience

categories of SP spectating to emerge from the data. The overarching spectator experience labels are: 'hard work', 'intense anticipation and relief' and 'places to be and controlled release'. Snapshot descriptions of processes implicit within each experience category of spectating are presented under italicised headings below.

To guard against preoccupations with loss of data, accuracy and to reduce effects of social desirability and recall error when using retrospective methods (Snelgrove & Havitz, 2010), two main steps were taken to enhance trustworthiness. The 'free report method' was used, where participants were encouraged to indicate that they don't remember in cases of uncertainty. Secondly, rather than asking participants to recall specific facts, questions such as 'tell me about your earliest experiences of spectating' were asked.

Being in a relationship with Amy, whether intentionally or unconsciously, exaggerated veneration (Lamont, 2014) and/or withholding of objectively true feelings is a possibility. However having asked Amy whether she felt she was withholding any feelings or experiences from me, I believe her when she replied "I've told it as it was". Similarly, after reading these reflections I was convinced that I have represented it as it was because she confirmed "that's how I remember it".

Findings

This section begins by presenting the emergent themes pertaining to the first research aim of understanding how SPs experience spectating. Between snapshots from the data on SP experiences, possible explanations of processes which produced those experiences (i.e. second aim) are offered. Attention is now turned to understanding the range of experiences participants spoke about when spectating.

Hard work

The first experience theme of spectating contains depictions of being behind the barrier as hard work and a potential site offering the opportunity to achieve self-identified leisure- and gender-role fulfilment (Miller & Brown, 2005).

Waiting, watching, cheering. Speaking about her favourite 'logo' t-shirt with these three words across the front, Lynn opined: "It's a way of being part of it… That *is* what we do!"

Planning. For Connie, some of the 'work' involved is not only about helping your athlete prepare but SPs need to "…load up with snacks and drinks -just in case you can't get anything- and now with kids, they have to be kept occupied…".

Screaming. Support can be scarce and it needs to be managed effectively. The following photograph illustrates this, lending an alternative perspective to the roar in McCarville (2007) which he writes is "palpable as I run down the path" (p. 166).

[Figure 1]

At the bottom of the hill, Connie is screaming as Alvin approaches. As her voice fades, Alvin's dad cheers him down the other side. "The Ireland flag comes everywhere with us" Connie said, "…where people are thin on the ground we spread the support out".

Intense anticipation and relief

The second dominant theme contains depictions of being behind the barrier as anxiety-provoking, characterised by periods of intense anticipation. It is common for SPs to feel 'nervous' and 'worried' that "he might be struggling or not doing very well" (Amy). But when a glance has been had, worry changes to 'excitement' and 'relief'.

Nervous. For even the most experienced SP, spectating can still be worrisome. Connie explained, "This is the start at Kona. I feel really, really nervous at the start of all Alvin's races…"

[Figure 2]

Worry. Connie continued, "…I like to be at every Ironman because it's worrying that accidents happen…like at Ironman UK. I knew he had crashed because he took too long on the bike…"

Fear. Producing Figure 3 taken before the race, Amy explained, "your racer has no idea what you're feeling… Although I'm smiling, I'm not really. That is a look of fear!" [Figure 3]

Excitement. Despite such intense emotion, all SPs spoke about feeling excited when they see their triathlete.

> "Once you see them, you feel excited…when I knew Bryan was coming close to getting a PB… I was so excited…I thought I was going to vomit" (Lynn).

[Figure 4]

Relief. Although Connie did not present the photograph, she explained,

> "There is a good one in Hawaii at the finish and I'm smiling, full of relief. When they finish, you start to enjoy it."

This brings us to the third experience category which considers possible answers to the question, what is it that SPs are thinking when they are stuck in spectator space?

Places to be and controlled release

The third experience theme contains depictions of spectating as an activity requiring intuition and deliberation. Findings suggest that curating the exchange of 'additional glances' constitutes 'successful' spectating because when eyes meet and cheers are audible, SPs experience a release of emotion. This idea of a 'controlled' release addresses the second research aim.

Getting into and staying in position. Having spotted their triathlete, everyday needs take hold. SPs need to leave spectator space but "popping to the loo" can be tricky because "you worry you're going to miss them" (Amy).

Gaining additional glances. A satisfying experience is had when SPs manage a scheduled glance *plus* some more supportive encounters. But reproducing this 'controlled release' doesn't come easy. The SP learns -through attending many events- to 'balance the variables' and take triathlete-predicted times with a 'pinch of salt'.

Letting go of predictions. Lynn says "don't bank on the times he gives because you don't know what's going to happen". Lynn recalls having to pacify Amy:

> "…Amy didn't know you had bike problems so an hour after she expected you, she was *white*…. I was saying, 'if he'd fallen off…we would've known by now'…" (Lynn).

Balancing the variables. The participants show us that reading the performance of their partner requires the balancing of many variables such as weather, goals, form and previous performances. Intuiting much of this from a 'glance' is an admixture of judgement and deliberative calculation. If he appears to be struggling, estimates for the time/place of the next 'glance' need revising.

Summary

Figuring out times the partner will be at different points on the course and deciding where to wait in order to clap, cheer and scream and catch a glimpse seems to be part of the attraction of events or, so it was for my participants.

One criticism however that might be levelled here is, that as a triathlete, I have approached the case study from a 'performance' perspective, inadvertently 'locking' myself into thinking in terms of 'competition space'. This gives primacy to relationship dynamics and processes associated with interactions between SPs and triathletes, drawing attention

away from the social dimensions of SPs' interactions with other partners of different experience levels, degrees of shared leisure involvement and gender. Attention has unwittingly been drawn away from interactions with other supporters and the potential for SPs to generate communitas (i.e. the sense of being the same as each other) with other supporters. Subsequently, the research net needs to be cast more broadly.

Toward a research agenda

The agenda outlined here has potential to contribute to understanding of SP experiences in a number of ways.

First, that Amy benefited from Lynn's soothing words draws attention to the importance of the support that SPs receive from each other, highlighting potential benefits of spectating with experienced supporters. But exactly what kinds of care SPs give each other and how that care is received remains relatively underexplored. Research should focus on the social dimensions, interactions and connections between SPs.

This line of inquiry invites further questions. For example, how do other spectators, who are not actively involved in triathlon experience spectator space? How do experiences of 'first-timers' compare/contrast with those of seasoned spectators? How do SPs who are triathletes themselves experience spectator space? What about the nuances between spectators with/without children and/or pets? How are resources mobilised and how are the collective actions of other SPs experienced when communitas spontaneously emerges? And what if spectators are alone?

There is potential to contribute to understanding in other ways. Secondly, it would be interesting to explore what kinds of care SPs currently receive from event organizers. While the relationship between Lynn and Amy demonstrates the importance of care-giving it also points to a potential general lack of 'care' (i.e. education, assistance) given to SPs by organizers who may want to know what kind(s) of care, if any, SPs would like to receive.

Care comes in different guises and may be differentially experienced. Understanding 'care-needs' and who would respond well to care-offerings requires segmental analysis and may help organisers further differentiate (e.g. Lamont et al., 2012). Additional questions arise: Are there sufficient spaces to eat/rest? Can spectator stand layout facilitate social connection?

Thirdly, numerous avenues for future research exist around the need to further explore "the fear component" (Coghlan, 2012, p. 118). Although none of my participants described their fear as negative enough to prevent future spectating, what might it take for this to happen? Could there be an over-representation of fear in the SPs narratives here relative to a wider community? To what extent might risk have been 'written' into triathlete-spectator dialogue through over-exaggerated media coverage of the "washing machine" (e.g. McCarville, 2007, p. 166)? Failure to understand the nuances of how fear is socially constructed may lead to misleading and/or managerial suggestions.

Imagining situations where things 'go wrong' raises questions concerning SP experiences with "disappointment of failing to achieve personal goals" (Lamont et al., 2014, p. 146). How is 'failure' experienced by SPs and how do SPs support each other in such situations? When there are accidents, how is 'emergency space' experienced by SPs? What coping strategies are employed to get through those emergent situations? Which kind of SP would benefit from learning about/using such strategies?

With increasing numbers of middle-aged men turning to triathlon (Simmons et al., 2016) and emerging discourses centred on becoming 'fit enough' to finish rather than adopting sustainable healthy lifestyle behaviours (Bridel, 2013); more research is needed to understand how partners supporting those who swim/ride/run at 'the back of the pack' cope with fear, if they do.

How do SPs experience other strong emotions throughout the day? How might a tentative chronological framework or 'fear map' look? The use of 'deep mapping' methods (Maddrell, 2016) might help here, casting new light on spatial and emotional-affective dimensions of spectating. And instead of asking participants to produce photographs, future research should also use other visual methods, e.g. academic filmmaking (Rakić & Chambers, 2010), providing vivid insights on spectating in *real time*.

Concluding thoughts

There are more questions than answers and since empirical investigations on SP experience are sparse, this reflection offers notes on an area of study that remains relatively unexplored. For example, there is a need for more research on the care that is required by SPs, where it comes from and how it can be facilitated by event organizers. Although I have focused only on women's experiences, I hope my reflections lead to further studies capable of producing results which will be of interest to not only researchers who carry out leisure inquiries into triathlon, but also to other tourism and leisure researchers studying sport, event management, tourism and/or couple leisure experiences more generally.

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